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Quick Vote Is Sought On Gingrich Penalty

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House Republican leaders said yesterday that they want the House to vote on punishing House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) on Jan. 7, the same day lawmakers are to vote on whether to make him the first Republican reelected speaker in 68 years.

Before the House can vote, the House ethics committee must meet to recommend a sanction for Gingrich, who acknowledged on Saturday that he had violated House rules after steadfastly denying for more than two years that he had done anything wrong.

House Republican Conference Chairman John A. Boehner (Ohio) said the leaders hope the ethics panel can agree on a punishment "and bring it to the floor on opening day and get it behind us."

Boehner's appearance on ABC's "This

Week" was part of the media offensive GOP leaders launched Saturday to try to diminish the significance of the violations that Gingrich admitted. The goal appears to be to similarly minimize the punishment.

The leaders appear to have succeeded in securing Gingrich's reelection as House speaker. No GOP lawmaker has spoken out against him since his admission that he broke the rules, and some whose support had been wavering are speaking out in favor of him.

One of them, Rep. Peter T. King (R-N.Y.) said yesterday, "The Republicans will stand as one on January 7 because there is no reason not to." On CBS's "Face the Nation" King said, "The ethics committee did not come up with any reason that would justify a 'no' vote in my mind."

Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.), who had said he would not have voted for Gin-

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grich to be speaker if the ethics charges had not been resolved, said on CNN's "Late Edition," "I'll vote for him eagerly."

Gingrich admitted to the charges detailed in the 22-page Statement of Alleged Violation—essentially an indictment—that the ethics panel's investigative subcommittee issued Saturday. The subcommittee concluded Gingrich should have consulted a lawyer to ensure that using tax-deductible contributions to finance both a college course he taught and a televised town hall meeting would not violate federal tax law. Furthermore, the statement said, he gave the panel untrue information when it investigated those projects.

The speaker said his violations were not intentional. "I accept responsibility for this and I deeply regret it," he said.

By admitting to the charges, Gingrich avoids a public hearing into them and instead he moves directly to the penalty phase. The full ethics committee of five Republicans and five Democrats has great leeway in determining Gingrich's punishment.



FILE PHOTO/BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

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Its rules allow it to suggest any sanction "determined by the committee to be appropriate."

GOP sources said Gingrich had been seeking a reprimand, which the ethics panel's rules say is appropriate "for serious violations." Many Democrats are pressing for censure, which is second only to expulsion in severity and could lead to Gingrich being stripped of his speakership.

Censured lawmakers are treated like felons, taken to the well of the House and admonished by the speaker.

Appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press," House Majority Leader Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.) said censure would not be "appropriate for the errors that were made."

Rep. Martin Frost (D-Tex.)—who was a leading defender of House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) who

resigned in disgrace as the result of a Gingrich-led ethics campaign—disagreed. “This is absurd, this line the Republicans are taking that it’s okay to lie to Congress as long as you apologize,” he said in a telephone interview.

The GOP leaders’ media offensive is an example of Gingrich’s own communications strategy of developing simple phrases to describe an idea or proposal and then repeating them so often that they become axiomatic. In their effort to deflect attention from Gingrich’s use of charitable contributions to finance his projects, for instance, virtually every Republican who speaks of it publicly uses the same words to dismiss it—“arcane tax law.”

As the GOP leaders sought to characterize Gingrich’s violations, though, some of their descriptions did not quite match the words of the ethics committee’s findings.

Boehner, for instance, asserted that the ethics committee had “made it clear that Newt did not intend to mislead the committee, nor did Newt violate any tax laws.”

But the ethics committee’s statement does not address Gingrich’s intent when he told the panel that GO-

PAC, the political action committee he once headed, had no involvement with the college course. Instead, the panel simply concluded the information the speaker gave the committee “was inaccurate, incomplete and unreliable . . . as Mr. Gingrich should have known. . . . The ultimate responsibility for the accuracy of information submitted to the committee remained with Mr. Gingrich.”

And the investigative subcommittee reached no conclusion on whether Gingrich’s use of tax-deductible, charitable contributions to finance his college course and a televised town-hall meeting in which he was a central figure violated tax law—even though that was the issue the full ethics committee directed the panel to resolve.

At the same time, though, the panel’s statement cites clear evidence that the charity-financed course had a “partisan, political role.” Federal tax law prohibits the use of tax-exempt contributions to further a partisan, political agenda.

In letters sent over Gingrich’s name to GOPAC contributors, the course was described as being intended to help Republicans win a House majority.

The main message of the course, the panel found, “was also the main message of GOPAC and the main message of virtually every political and campaign speech made by Mr. Gingrich in 1993 and 1994. The course was, among other things, the primary means for developing and disseminating this message.”

In their public remarks, GOP leaders also portray Gingrich’s admission of rules violations as the end of the ethics committee’s investigation of him, speaking of “getting it behind us” and “moving on.” But the ethics committee is still looking into complaints that Gingrich received improper gifts, support and contributions from GOPAC, and the Internal Revenue Service is investigating the use of tax-deductible contributions to finance the college course.

Moreover, Democrats have made clear over the last two days they will not be satisfied if Gingrich is only lightly punished and will continue to highlight the speaker’s violation of the rules. “It’s very clear the speaker deceived the committee on 13 occasions,” House Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.) said on ABC. “If the average person would have



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done this, that person would go to jail.”

The leaders are also trying to paint Gingrich’s violations as being the result of being too concerned with changing the direction of America to focus on such details as tax law and submissions to the ethics committee.

“He was so busy, occupied with trying to do these policies and public service that he did, in fact, as he now regrets, get careless in reviewing the documents,” Armey said.

Armey also sought to distinguish the charges that Gingrich improperly used tax-exempt contributions to further his political goals from the charges that Wright used bulk book sales to evade House limits on honoraria income. “The Wright case was about money for Wright,” he said. “The case regarding the speaker was about ideas for Americans.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read excerpts of the House ethics committee’s charges against Speaker Newt Gingrich as well as his official response, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post’s site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>